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Ideas are not as stable as political scientists want them to be
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Abstract

Most theories about ideas in politics implicitly conceptualise ideas as relatively stable entities that act as a catalyst for political change in times of crisis. In these theories political change is usually brought on by the full and sudden replacement of old ideas with new ones. The paper's main charge against this mainstream perspective on ideas is that it is based on a simplified conception of ideas which biases the theories to focus on the role of ideas in times of crisis, and, in effect, they overlook incremental yet significant ideational change in times of stability. With inspiration from discourse analysis the paper develops a more dynamic understanding of ideas as made up by several elements of meaning that typically does not reach a final stage of stability or equilibrium. Furthermore, it is argued that a more dynamic analytical perspective can account for both incremental and paradigmatic ideational change. Two types of incremental ideational change are discussed and exemplified with empirical examples from British politics: First, a change in the relation between the existing elements of an idea, and, second, a change of one or more (but not all) elements of an idea.

1. Introduction*

Ideational research has in recent years gained prominence within political science, so much so that it has become common ground to argue that 'ideas matter'. This assertion is so broadly accepted that Rueschemeyer (2006) in a review of why and how ideas matter starts out by stating:

"That ideas matter in politics is beyond question" (p. 227). One argument that seems particular strong is that ideas have great(est) influence during times of crisis. In periods of crisis, existing ways of thinking have a declining ability to predict the outcome of joint interactions (Culpepper, 2008), and the upsetting of existing institutions leads to uncertainty about one's interests and how they can most effectively be maximised. In such times, ideas help actors to act in spite of uncertainty (Blyth, 2002). For all the success ideational theories have had arguing for the importance of ideas during crises, however, remarkably little has been done to show how ideas can lead to political change in times of stability. Ideational theories have tended to focus on the stabilizing role of ideas outside crisis situations, largely neglecting the task of studying how ideas can also develop in times of stability with significant political changes as a consequence.

This theoretical development is to a significant degree analogous to recent debates within historical institutional theory. One of the most enduring arguments within historical institutionalist research is that political change is restrained by 'path dependency'. However, recent research results indicate that in spite of path dependency, political institutions are indeed changing (e.g. Goul Andersen, 2007a, 2007b; Ebbinghaus, 2005; Hacker, 2004; Hinrichs, 2001; Hinrichs and Kangas, 2003; Jochem, 2007; van Kersbergen, 2000; Palier and Martin, 2007; Taylor-Gooby, 1999). A large part of the reason why researchers are experiencing difficulties determining whether we are witnessing stasis or change in contemporary welfare states lies not only in the problem of identifying the best quantitative and qualitative indicators of change (Clasen and Siegel, 2007), but also in the inability of current theoretical models to account for change within their own premises. Historical institutionalism functions well explaining stability, but to account for change historical institutionalist theories have a tendency of invoking external shocks or critical junctures that determine a change of policy path (leading yet again to stability). This is not theoretically satisfying, because only stability – and not rupture or change – is explicable within the theories. As Streeck and Thelen (2005) point out, transformative changes are not always abrupt and dramatic, and incremental changes are not always maintaining. In other words, both general institutionalist and ideational theories have focused most of their effort

* I would like to extend my gratitude to Jørgen Goul Andersen for commenting on the paper. A special thanks to Simon Bæk Carstensen who – employing his talent in computer science – spend a long afternoon trying to make my argument more coherent and logical. The extent to which he succeeded in this is obviously my responsibility.

on the stabilising effect of institutions and ideas respectively, neglecting the task of developing theories to account for incremental yet transformative change doing times of general stability.

The paper deals with ideational theories and argues that an important part of the reason why these theories have predominantly been used to explain ideational stability and large paradigmatic change is due to the conceptualisation of ideas within the tradition. In most theories, ideas are implicitly understood as rather coherent entities that provide actors with a relatively stable world view of causality and normativity. However, within other research traditions, notably discourse theory and conceptual analysis, we find a very different picture of ideas. In such theories, ideas are thought of in an almost opposite way, namely as non-fixed and contested entities that develop dynamically over time without ever reaching a final stage of stability. These theories are also distinguished from their counterparts within public policy analysis by their complexity and dynamism. However, what the post-structuralist theories are missing – especially with their adherence to context-focused analyses – is an ability to generate theories with general causality, an ambition that on the other hand is strongly present in ideational research within public policy. This implies that neither of the traditions can satisfactorily demonstrate nor explain incremental ideational change in policy, but also that there exists possibilities for theoretical cross-fertilisation between the traditions. It is thus the aim of this paper to use theories from both traditions to create an argument about how ideas change incrementally over time.

2. The role of ideas in mainstream ideational research

This section presses two claims about ideational theories within public policy and comparative politics: First, this research strand has not yet developed theories that can account for how ideas develop incrementally, and this hampers progress in explaining how ideas influence on politics. The variation on the ideational variable is usually *not* due to developments in the existing ideas, but instead due to the replacement of older ideas with new ideas. In other words, most theories tend to conceptualise ideational change as new ideas replacing old ones. Second, the paper argues that a majority of ideational theories within public policy and comparative politics conceptualise ideas as monolithic units that encompass whole sets of ideas. There are instances of lower level conceptualisations of ideas, but these are by and large limited to the literature on 'framing' that mostly focuses on the rhetorical sides of politics (Béland, 2009, 2005), or research on 'programmatic ideas' (Weir, 1992) that lie very close to what is normally understood as policy as such.

Taken together, the lack of attention to how ideas may develop incrementally over time, and the exaggerated focus on broad and coherent changes in paradigms and broader conceptions, implicitly bias ideational policy research towards a kind of "punctuated equilibrium model": ideational stability persists except in situations of sudden and

comprehensive change, typically in crisis situations. The reason is that relatively wide scale developments in a set of ideas are necessary for the analyst to spot the ideational change taking place. To support this claim, several important ideational studies from the political science tradition are reviewed in the two following subsections.

2.1 Explaining change in ideational analyses

Ideational theories have not least been deployed to endogenise explanations of change that much institutionalist theory explains with exogenous shocks (Schmidt, 2008a and 2008b). But how do ideational theories explain change? In Hall's (1993) oft quoted theoretical framework, ideas are important because as 'policy paradigms' they structure not only political solutions, but also how problems are conceived in the first place. What role do ideas or paradigms play in policy change? In Hall's account of the political influence of ideas, it is in situations of third order change - that is, a shift in the entire understanding of policy, involving both instruments and the hierarchy of goals (Hall, 1993: 279) – ideas come to impact on policy making. Following Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions, Hall suggests that a paradigm shift is partly attributable to an accumulation of anomalies that the paradigm is not able to account for: "Ad hoc attempts are generally made to stretch the terms of the paradigm to cover them, but this gradually undermines the intellectual coherence and precision of the original paradigm" (Hall, 1993: 280). In other words, change happens when the old paradigm fails, that is, in times of crisis. Ideas are, however, not assigned significant explanatory power in times of 'normal policymaking'. And it is not the development of ideas, but the replacement of old ideas with new ones that sets the stage for change.

A similar position is found in Mark Blyth's *Great Transformations* (2002), where it is explicitly argued that ideas matter most during times of crisis. In the five step model of institutional change (Blyth, 2002: 34-44), the replacement of old ideas with new ones is assigned the crucial explanatory role for ideas. Outside times of crisis, ideas serve to stabilise rather than transform existing institutions. This means that we are left with a model of critical junctures where the crisis serves as a trigger of change – no option is left for transformative, incremental change during stability. And once again, the sources of change are exogenous to the theoretical model. The situation is much the same in Parson's (2003) study of how the European Union became a community-oriented rather than a less ambitious intergovernmental project. Parsons argues that community-oriented ideas were institutionalised over time, blocking other ideas from organising the political project of the European Union. In Parsons' (2003) model, ideas come to constrain more than enable political change. In other words, we are not provided with any answer to how ideas may evolve over time. In other words, we are left with a theoretical framework that only uses ideas as a significant explanatory variable in explaining change during times of crisis and thus overlooks how ideas may over time transform incrementally.

Vivien A. Schmidt, however, comes close to suggest a theory of how ideas develop in times of stability. She argues that elements of a policy programme can change while others continue to play a role (Schmidt, 2002). This she calls evolutionary change, which "can be seen as entailing a renewal of the policy discourse and programme when the discourse claims to solve old concerns or new problems using new policy instruments without radically changing the policy objectives" (Schmidt, 2002: 224). In some of her most recent work, she points out how new ideas are rarely put to use on a clean slate. Instead, new ideas are typically reinterpreted and layered on top of old ones, creating association between old and new ideas (Schmidt, 2008b: 12). She also argues that 'discursive institutionalism' considers change in a more evolutionary manner (Schmidt, 2008a: 316). But though she states the problem, it does not appear to be solved in her theoretical framework. The main reason is that she does not show us with which mechanisms the ideas develop, and how it relates to the nature of an idea.

2.2 The conceptualisation of ideas in ideational analyses

Part of the reason why ideational theories tend to over-emphasize stability between crises, is found in the way ideas are typically conceptualised as relatively stable, homogenous and encompassing entities of meaning. Once again, some of the most cited studies within the ideational tradition will serve as illustrations.

In their already classic text about ideas in foreign policy, Goldstein and Keohane (1993) describe three ways that ideas have political impact: As road maps in face of uncertainty; as focal points that serve to define cooperative solutions; and as ideas encased within institutions. The different types of ideas are described as stable, coherent and seemingly incapable of developing over time. In Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) theoretical framework, the prime function of an idea becomes just this: to stand still and not change until a new (and better) idea comes around. In this way, a conceptualisation that depicts ideas as essentially frozen overemphasises the stabilising function of ideas at the expense of the transformative potential that ideas also contain.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, Hall (1993) provides an equally static conceptualisation of ideas as the one exhibited by Goldstein and Keohane (1993). In Hall's theory political actors' use of ideas lead to change when the ideas are institutionalised as a paradigm. What make ideas powerful are their stability and their ability to order action in patterned ways leading to the elimination of other political solutions, which in large part hinges on the support of centrally placed political actors. In this conceptualisation, ideas are only contradictory, ambiguous, open for contestation – in other words: dynamic – when they are about to be replaced with new ideas. A similar conceptualisation is found in other theories about the institutionalisation of ideas. When Parsons (2003) talks of ideas he is referring to certain models: the 'community model' and the 'confederal model', and how one model "ruled out others as active options, making their victory permanent".

Arguing for a 'permanent victory' of an idea certainly lends support to the belief that Parsons (2003) is operating with an understanding of stable ideas functioning – indeed, exerting their power – through coherence and order. The understanding is much the same in Blyth's (2002) conceptualisation of ideas reviewed above. In his five step model of the institutionalisation of ideas, ideas are conceptualised as stable entities that can be used in a number of situations to fill out a range of functions: reducing uncertainty; functioning as weapons to delegitimize existing institutions; aligning actors' interests; etc. It is not indicated at any point that ideas may develop over time in such a way that it leads to significant political changes, e.g. by almost unnoticeably changing actors' conception of their own interests.

Other recent analyses, however, have done more to include the inconsistencies, fuzziness and lack of conceptual stringency in their conceptualisation of ideas. For example, Schmidt (2002) proposes to substitute Hall's (1993) understanding of policy change as a Kuhnian replacement of one hegemonic discourse with Lakatos' picture of overlapping research programmes. In this perspective there might be one dominant paradigm, but there "may be other minority discourses waiting in the wings proposing alterative policy programmes" (Schmidt, 2002: 223). Thus, separate discourses that share a complementary understanding of the basic policy programme may exist at the same time.

Another example is Jabko (2006), who argues that an important part of what makes ideas strong does not stem from "their conceptual coherence but from their relative malleability" (p. 36). This prompts us to focus on tensions and inconsistencies of ideas and institutions as a source of change. In his study of the path dependency of the ideas behind the Scandinavian welfare states, Cox (2004) points to how the lack of ideational clarity within the paradigm enables the model to cover a lot of inconsistency and contradiction and thus in practice function as a viable frame of reference for political actors trying to set a common tone in reform processes. From a more general perspective, Lieberman (2002) argues that many analyses within institutional analysis have a tendency of overemphasising ordered patterns and regularities. This focus on order blocks our view of more incremental yet transformative change within existing institutions. Ideas can clash with each other as well as existing institutions, a friction that may lead to significant political change. However, though Jabko (2006), Cox (2004), Lieberman (2002) and Schmidt (2002, 2008b) bring us some way in pinpointing the problematic lack of dynamism in existing ideational theory, this is not followed up by a general theory of how political ideas develop incrementally over time.

2.3 Concluding remarks

The theoretical consequences of conceptualising ideas as 1) stable entities 2) that only bring about change when they replace existing ones are twofold: They bias attention towards crisis situations, and they bias us toward emphasising the stabilising effect of ideas.

Even though it is plausible that ideas matter most in times of crisis, we should not neglect the possibility of incremental yet transformative changes during times of stability. This point has recently gained prominence in historical institutionalist theory (especially Streeck and Thelen, 2005) and has also been voiced within the ideational research tradition (Gofas and Hay, 2009; Seabrooke, 2009). Though ideational theories, as mentioned above, seem open to the notion of incrementally developing ideas, a majority of the work within ideational research has explicitly or implicitly used punctuations and critical junctures to explain change, leaving the question of how ideas change incrementally almost untouched. The paper seeks to fill this gap in ideational theory by developing a theory about the nature of ideas.

3. The nature of an idea and the role of actors

3.1 Discourse theory and the nature of an idea

A theory about the nature of an idea should obviously take as its starting point a definition of what an idea is. The concept of an idea is heavily burdened by its long history in Western philosophy, which makes it impossible to create a definition that can apply satisfactorily to all studies of ideas. Thus, this paper formulates a definition that can function as a foundation for studying ideas within comparative politics and public policy. As a basis for the following discussion, an idea is defined as a *network of related elements of meaning*. The definition takes as its starting point the argument that uncertainty and complexity characterises the lives of actors. Thus, individuals need socially constructed heuristics that can reduce societal complexity to a level that enable them to act. These cognitive short cuts are what the definition refers to as 'elements of meaning'. Meaning is created intersubjectively through the use of language. This is a discourse theoretical and post-structuralist point: the meaning of social, economic and political phenomena is generated with linguistic means. The basic substance of social reality is subjects that continually interpret and reinterpret the different components of their shared horizon of meaning. Meaning is thus created from a collective's attempt to make sense of the subjective and intersubjective social reality as well as the material world surrounding them.

Though ideational theories rarely explicate this argument, it is implicit to many theories in this tradition. What is also common to most theories is – as mentioned above – a conceptualisation of ideas as ordered, stable and coherent entities. Sceptical of this understanding of ideas, Hudson and Martin (2009) prompt us to "be less concerned with the overall structure – as it appears *in toto* – than with individual elements, the props" (p. 25). This is a contention worth developing on, because choosing between a focus on micro- or macro-i½deas is an analytical choice with significant analytical consequences: Focusing on macro-ideas tends to make the analyst look for core ideas, whereas using micro-ideas as explanatory variables sensitises the analyst to focus on how ideas are made up

of several elements of meaning, not a core idea. Thus, the first important element in our discussion of the definition of an idea is to reject conceptualising ideas as containing a core that determines its meaning. Beyond this rejection, however, we need a theoretical framework to formulate a theory about the nature of an idea that deals with the micro-structure of ideas. In this respect, post-structuralist theory and conceptual analysis is helpful to our purpose.

The argument that the meaning of an idea does not derive from a core element is not new. However, the relational perspective has yet not had its breakthrough in either ideational policy studies or most theories about ideology, where ideas are most often conceptualised as having an objectified core (Bevir, 2005: 55-60). The relational understanding has had a long history in linguistic theory, though. One of the main proponents of the argument about relational meaning was the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics), Saussure (1974) outlined his famous argument about the arbitrariness of the sign. According to Saussure there exists no natural relation between the acoustic image (the signifier) and a concept (the signified). For example, there is no reason that the sign *cat* must necessarily be connected to the concept 'cat' – this relationship is instead a linguistic convention within certain language systems. The convention is based upon the relation to other words. For example, the meaning of the word 'mother' does not derive from its relation to a certain object, but instead from its relation to other words like "father", "grandmother" and "daughter". In essence, Saussure presents a relational understanding of language as opposed to an essentialist conception (Howarth, 2005). It has the theoretical consequence "that language constitutes a *system* in which no element can be defined independently of the others (…) each element of the system is exclusively defined by the rules of its combination and substitutions with the other elements" (Laclau, 1993, italics in original). In the context of analysing the nature of an idea, we may thus think of the idea as the system and the elements of meaning as words within the system. In this way we can speak of an idea as constituted by a *network of related elements of meaning*.

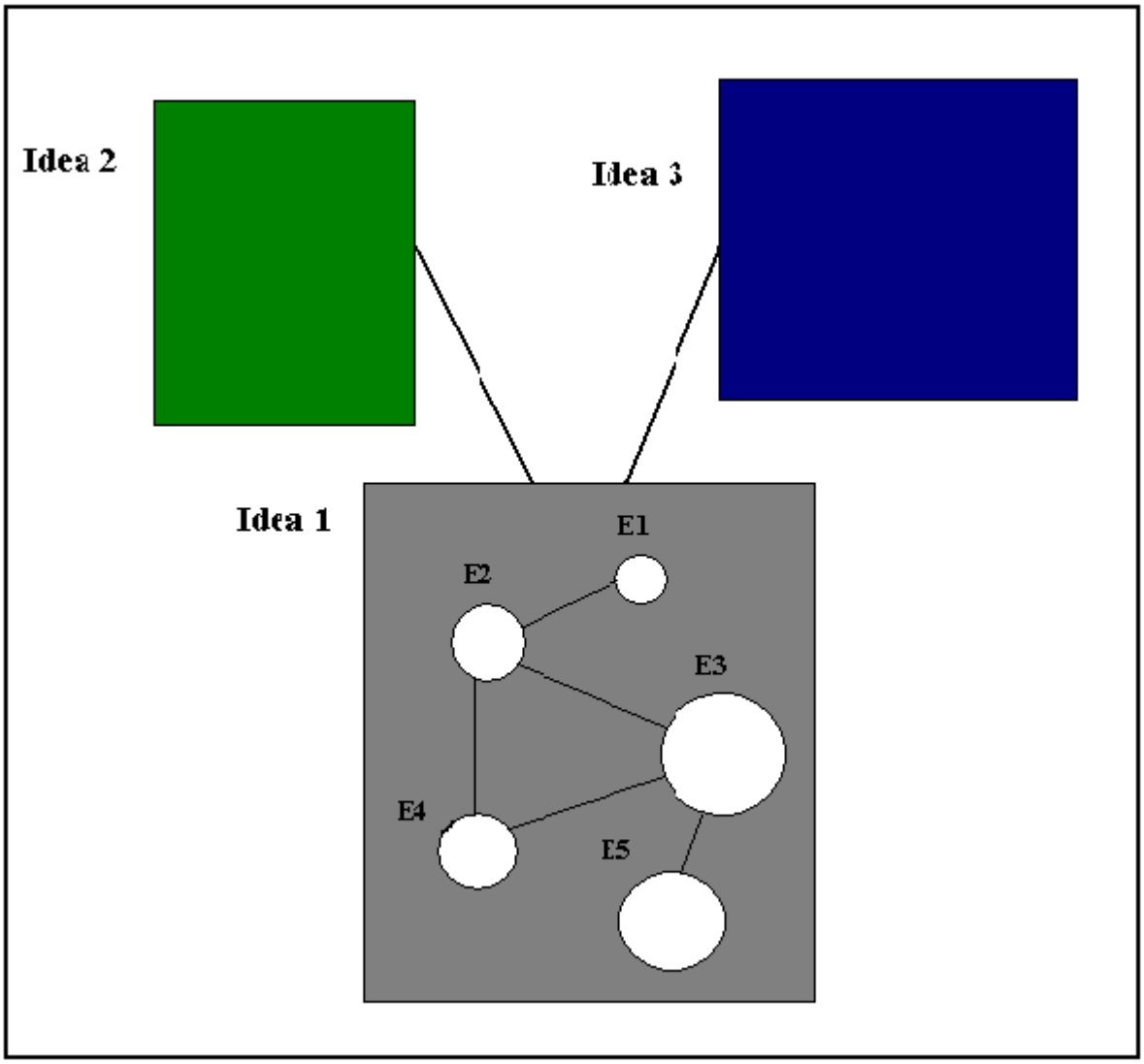
Saussure's ideas have had to be developed further in discourse theory and conceptual analysis to be useful in social scientific analysis. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) follow Saussure's argument about the arbitrariness of the sign, when they argue that a discursive formation – which resembles our understanding of an idea – is not unified[1]. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discourses are constituted by regularity of dispersion

[1] There is an abundance of discourse theories, but this paper mainly endorses the post-structuralist perspective of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) for two reasons: First, with their inspiration from Saussure, they work with a dynamic conception of ideas and discourse as based on relations and not principles internal to the discourse (cf. below). Thus, in their discourse theory they focus on the non-fixity of ideas, which is helpful in developing a theory of ideational incremantalism. Second, Laclau and Mouffe focus strongly on power, not least how actors use discourses to gain power, and this makes their theory fit well with the political scientific perspective of the paper.

rather than an underlying principle external to the discourse. The different parts of the discourse depend closely on each other:

> "The point is that all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference (…) Necessity derives, therefore, not from an underlying intelligible principle but from the regularity of a system of structural positions" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 106).

We can speak of the relations between elements of meaning within an idea as the *internal* determinant of ideational meaning. There exists, however, also what could be called an *external* determinant of meaning, namely the ideational environment that the idea is part of. Originating in a different theoretical tradition than the post-structuralist, but still with a reference to Saussure, the conceptual analyst, Michael Freeden (1996), argues that the meaning of an idea – or what he calls a 'concept' – is acquired through its particular location within a constellation of other ideas. Or to put it differently: "political concepts will gather meaning from their empirically ascertainable ideational context, from the idea-environment in which they are located" (Freeden, 1996: 73). Thus, the theory developed in this paper spans at least two levels, namely, first, the network of elements of meaning within the idea, and, second, at a 'higher' level, the relation between different ideas (with the theoretical possibility of moving to a third, the macro-level of a paradigm). This perspective has the strength, then, that multiple levels of an idea and the relation between them, can be studied within the same analysis. The model is illustrated below in model 1, where *E* signifies an element of meaning, and the lines signify relations between the different units of the model:



Model 1: A model of political ideas and their internal elements

The model encompasses three levels: First, the elements of meaning and the relation between them; second, the relation between (in this case three) ideas; and third, the paradigm that is constituted by the three ideas (illustrated with the square that encapsulates the three ideas).

Focusing on the first level, it is worth noting that the different elements of an idea do not inhabit equally important positions in constituting the meaning of the idea. In this way, it is possible to talk of a kind of 'hierarchy' between the elements of the idea. According to Freeden (1996) ideologies contain both ineliminable elements that cannot be dispensed with without loosing crucial meaning (for example non-constraint in liberalism), and more marginal elements[2]. These latter marginal elements, however, "add vital gloss to

[2] The ineliminable elements are not cores, though. They are not intrinsic or logically necessary to the meaning of the idea. The features are ineliminable "in the sense that all known usages of the concept employ it, so that its absence would deprive the concept of intelligibility and communicability" (p. 62) and "to eliminate it

its [the ideology's] core concepts" (p. 78) and an ideology – as well as an idea – need these marginal elements to gain the amount of complexity necessary to create meaning for individuals and support their actions. Moreover, elements inhabiting a peripheral position in the idea may over time gravitate from a more central to a marginal position, or vice versa. Freeden (1996) provides the example of natural rights that gravitated from a core to a marginal position in liberalism, and violence that gravitated from a marginal to a core position in the development of fascism (p. 78). An important part of ideational development is thus the potential changes in the relative weight of the elements making up the idea. This is a central feature in the theory of change, which we will return to in the next section.

It is important to note how the relations of meaning that constitute an idea are never shielded from exterior challenge. This is because it is not logical necessity that creates the relations, but rather social practices that are never fully determined by an overarching structure. In this sense, ideas are not closed systems of fixed meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out: "neither absolute fixity nor absolute non-fixity is possible" (p. 111). Because discourse is never hermetically sealed from other discourses – its identity is based on relations to other discourses – there always exists a possibility of exchange and communication between them (Howarth, 2005: 165, cf. Laclau, 1993). This also means that discourse and the meaning of an idea can change when its components – or its relation to other ideas – change: "Ideologies constitute semantic fields in that each component interacts with all the others and is changed when any one of the other components alters" (Freeden, 1996: 67). The assertion that ideas are not fixed, opens up for a dynamic and diachronically sensitive analysis of the development of ideas that does not treat ideas as coherent and stable entities.

3.2 Constructing the actor

Ideational theory needs more room for strategic political actors than discourse theory in most cases offers. This should not be taken to imply that discourse theory is not sensitive to the role of actors. Quite to the contrary, discourse theory builds on the notion that actors are not structurally determined, thus making it an important purpose of analysis to determine how actors actively construct their identity and acts in accordance with it (Howarth, 2005; Thomsen, 1997). However, discourse theory is less helpful in explaining action within the political system, not least because of its rejection of more traditional forms of intentional causality (Thomsen, 1997: 88). To put it pragmatically: A discourse theoretical perspective presents the most coherent and advanced theoretical framework for understanding the nature of ideas, but ideational research is better at explaining political action, that is, how political actors use ideas in political struggles. Furthermore, existing ideational theories of actors are easier to operationalise for empirical analysis. Thus, the theoretical

means to fly against all known usages of the concept (though it does not rule out its removal in the future)" (Freeden, 1996: 63).

challenge is to combine the insights from discourse theory presented above, with existing ideational theories of how actors use ideas, as they have been developed within public policy and comparative politics. To understand how actors use ideas in political struggles, a conceptualisation of actors as intentional and bounded rational is necessary, which will be elaborated further below.

A fitting starting point for the construction of the actors within a theory of how ideas develop over time is to reject the rational choice understanding of an actor as a utility maximiser with clear goals for his actions. Actors act within systems of great complexity and a rather large degree of uncertainty (Blyth, 2002, 2009; cf. Simon, 1985; Lindblom, 1959; March and Olsen, 1989), which makes it necessary to use ideas as heuristics for action. As Jabko (2006) puts it, actors:

> "constantly have to make choices in the present while knowing that these choices will have unpredictable and contentious consequences beyond the short term. Actors formulate and pursue broad visions of what they want to achieve. These visions provide them with a sense of direction…By necessity, actors often have to embark on a course of action without being sure where it will lead them" (p. 26).

But actors are not institutional and ideational 'dopes' unable to reflectively use the resources at hand to try to gain political power and influence. Instead, actors are, at least to some degree, able to reflectively and critically evaluate the system they are part of and the role they play within it (Schmidt, 2008a). We are, in other words, witnessing a tightrope walk between accepting that actors on the one side act with intentionality and on the other side are dependent on existing ideas to act purposefully.

3.3 Actors and ideational change

It is important to acknowledge that ideas do not change by themselves. Actors need to use and activate ideas if they are to have a political impact (Béland, 2005; Berman, 1998, 2006; Bevir, 2005; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). At the same time, however, actors cannot use ideas as they see fit and without regard for the nature of ideas. To analyse how ideas develop over time, it is thus necessary to clarify the relationship between ideas and actors, which is the chief aim of this section.

Ideas function as both a constraint and a resource for actor: actors need ideas to handle uncertainty and systemic complexity, and at the same time ideas can be used by actors to affect other actors' conception of the world and in this way become a powerful political tool. According to Laclau (1993) it is indeed the aim of all politics to partially fix the relation between signifier and signified and in this way dominate and structure the identity of actors (cf. Howarth, 2005: 149), or, in the words of Laclau and Mouffe (1985),

try to create 'hegemony'. According to Freeden (1996) it is exactly hegemony (or as he calls it, 'decontestation') that ideologies strive to create:

> "They [ideologies, a.n.] aim at cementing the word-concept relationship. By determining the meaning of a concept they can then attach a single meaning to a political term. Ultimately, ideologies are configurations of *decontested* meanings of political concepts" (p. 76, italics in original).

It is a central point for both Freeden (1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) that this closure of ideas is never fully possible, but it is exactly what actors try to accomplish, when they struggle to establish the dominant vision of the world.

How is the relationship between actors and ideas dynamic? One way of answering the question, is to analyse a struggle between two sets of actors: The original creator of an idea and his rivals trying to challenge its meaning[3]. The position of the original creator is characterised by a mix of constraints and possibilities in creating new meaning. On the one side, the actor is privileged by the possibility of presenting a new idea and in this process to choose what network of ideas he wants to place his idea in. In this way the original creator has a first-mover advantage in framing the idea and can thus significantly affect the range of other ideas it can combine with in the future. An important part of decontesting the meaning of an idea it to try to fix its relation to other ideas, and an essential part of this process consists in choosing what network of already existing ideas the new idea will reside in. The original creator naturally holds a privileged position in this regard.

On the other side, when a policy idea is first created, it must be joined with other already existing ideas in order to obtain meaning and public resonance. Actors act as 'bricoleurs', who recombine elements from the existing repertoire of ideas to create new meaning. This has the obvious consequence of creating ideational path dependence (Campbell, 2004), and thus restrains the forms of meaning actors in practice can create. Actors can place an idea in a network of other ideas, but the range of different possible networks is structured by the existing ideational tradition of a policy area. The ideational environment of a new idea is thus determined in two steps: First by the tradition of the policy field it is introduced within as well as the more general category of 'national political culture'. And second by the original creator of the idea, who additionally limits the range of trajectories that the idea can develop in.

The position of the rival actor, who has an interest in changing the meaning of the new idea to correspond to his own vision of the world, is obviously different. He has

[3] This is of course a simplification. Ideas are never simply created anew by actors. Instead ideas are layered on top of and related to previous ideas (Schmidt, 2008b). Thus, the idea that one actor develops is always part of a larger complex of ideas created by other actors through time. On the other hand, ideas do not pop up out the blue, they need actors to present and defend them. This makes the following argument reasonable as an analytical simplification.

no immediate influence over what network of ideas the idea is placed in, and thus his influence is based on his ability to change the network of ideas. One way of doing so, is to contest the interpretation of the relations between the ideas in the network, possibly trying to move certain ideas that are at the centre of the constellation to a more peripheral position. Another way is to change the composition of the network of ideas that the idea is part of, e.g. by trying to inject a new idea into the network. As argued above, this would change the overall structure of meaning in the network.

3.4 Concluding remarks

This description of an exchange between an original creator and his rival serves to illustrate the dynamic and incremental nature of ideas, and thus also how the prevalent conceptualisation of ideas as coherent entities within ideational research is inaccurate. This section has sought to bring home this point with two connected arguments. First, discourse analysis tells us that ideas are never fixed, because this demands that they are structured by an underlying principle, which would leave them closed off from the surrounding social world. Indeed, politics is all about trying to decontest meaning, to create ideational totality, but it is a task that is never successfully carried out. The political struggle consists in binding ideas together to create meaning for other actors, both on an elite and mass level. Second, and following this, actors can use ideas to impose their vision of the world on other actors, but actors are constrained by both the existing ideational terrain and other actors. Thus, actors can use ideas, but the ideas are never controllable. The understanding of ideas that follows from this is radically different from the conceptualisations in mainstream ideational research. The perspective is helpful as a basis for showing how ideas change incrementally over time, and, not least, how this leads to political change in a broader sense, which is the subject of the next section.

4. Mechanisms of ideational change

Based on the theoretical discussion presented above, this section outlines two general mechanisms of incremental, ideational change: First, a change in the *relation* between the existing elements of an idea, which means that the elements of the idea remain constant, but the hierarchy of the elements (periphery/centre) changes, thus changing the relative weight and importance of the elements. And, second, a change in the *composition* of the elements of an idea, where the introduction of one or more new element of meaning into the idea significantly changes the meaning of the idea. Of course, this is in no way an exhaustive list of mechanisms of ideational change[4]. One could imagine other mechanisms,

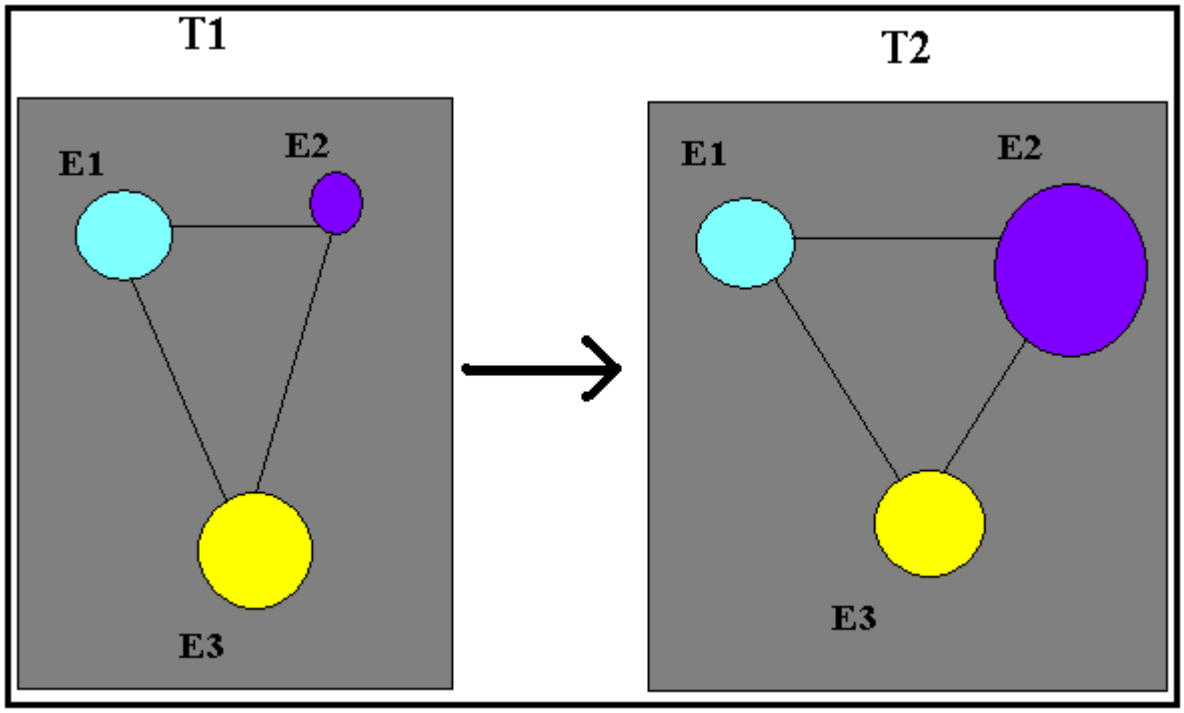
[4] E.g. the layering or embedding of new ideas into older ones, thereby changing both old and new ideas. Or that the 'ownership' of an idea changes over time, analogous to Streeck and Thelen's (2005) idea of institutional 'conversion'.

and this serves simply as an illustration of how ideas can change incrementally. It is also worth noting that the two mechanisms of incremental ideational change often occur simultaneously, but in the theoretical discussion below the two mechanisms are kept apart for analytical purposes.

A note of caution is necessary at this point: The examples in the two following sections should *not* be read as an attempt to present an empirical analysis of how ideas change incrementally. Instead, the examples are used to illustrate the mechanisms of change that are analysed theoretically in the paper. A proper empirical analysis would necessitate the collection of data and selection of cases sensitised to capture the nature of ideas, which is not the case in the studies reviewed below. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of this paper to present such evidence. Thus the following examples merely serves to show how ideas in real life have changed incrementally, and to some extent render probably that these ideational changes have led to significant political change.

4.1 Change in the relation between existing elements in an idea: Individualisation in New Labour's employment policy

As mentioned in the last chapter, the elements of an idea do not inhabit equally important positions. All the elements affect the meaning of the idea, but some are more strongly articulated and fill out a greater 'space' in the network of elements. The relative importance of the elements may, however, change over time. This means that an idea can for example develop from being less consequential for the meaning of the idea to become organising for the other elements. That all the elements still exist within the network means that the change in relative importance does not lead to a paradigmatic change. Instead, to analysts the change might rather look like, and possibly turn out to be, a consolidation of the elements of the idea. None the less, the meaning of the idea has changed and the incremental ideational development may thus have significant political consequences. The mechanism is illustrated in model 2 below:



Model 2: Change in the relation between existing elements of an idea

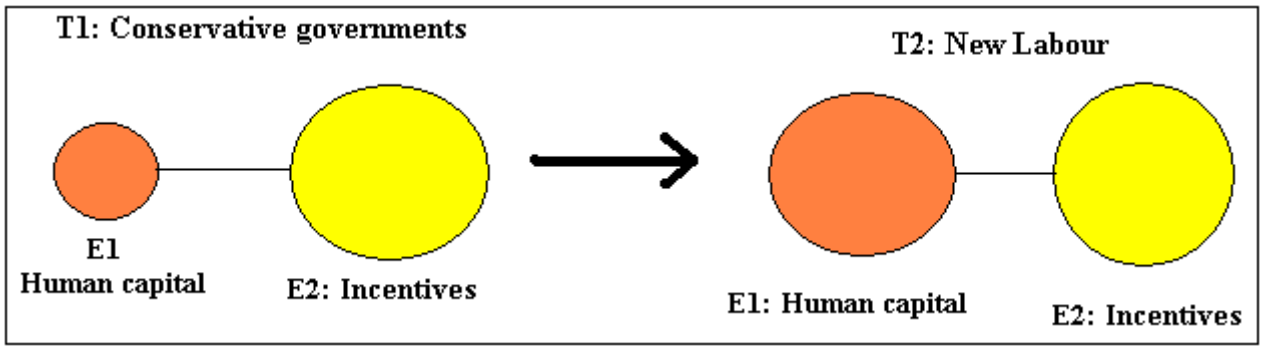
In the process of moving from the first cluster of elements (T1) to the second (T2), the elements E1 and E3 retain the same space in the network of the idea, but element E2 changes size to inhabit a larger part of the idea, and thus plays a greater role in defining the meaning of the idea.

This mechanism can be illustrated empirically with the incremental development in the meaning of the idea 'Individualisation' in British employment policy from Thatcher and Major's Conservative governments to Tony Blair's New Labour.

The Conservatives' employment policy grew out of a critique of the tendency of the welfare state to undermine incentives to take job. According to the Tatcher-governments the end result was the creation of an underclass of people dependent on benefits with neither the means nor incentives to improve their life situation. This in turn, so it was argued, led to a rise in immorality, crime, drug-abuse, etc. The solution was to attach clear duties to the right to benefits, which allegedly stood in opposition to Old Labour's policies of passive benefit. Thatcher's policies are thus based on the idea of 'Individualisation' with a focus on (lack of) incentives. According to Bevir (2005) this argument was accepted by New Labour, but it was supplemented with a critique of the Conservatives and the New Right for undermining communities with their focus on an atomised individual. New Labour's employment policy was thus created through an effort not to dismantle the state, "but rather to transform it into a vehicle for promoting responsibility through active intervention" (Bevir, 2005: 90). In essence, New Labour adopted the Conservatives' (notably John Major's conservatism) rights/obligations connection (Lund, 2008), but supple-

mented this with an ambition to empower and support unemployed people to get a job and thus become self-supporting again. The main responsibility of the state, according to New Labour ideology - consists in creating opportunities for work and training, while the client must accept the offers it is presented to. 'Individualisation' is in this context builds on a human capital-oriented idea.

As mentioned, the rights/obligation connection was not new in British employment policy. Already in the end 1980s there were policies in place with the goal of supporting unemployed people in getting work, notably the Restart Interview that was implemented in an effort to reduce long term unemployment. In the interviews, that normally would take 15-25 minutes, the caseworker sought to establish the client's reasons for being unemployment and provide counselling on seeking jobs, courses to improve the client's employability or perhaps contact potential employers. New Labour has sustained and extended this type of service, for example by providing significantly longer interviews (Finn, 2003). Moreover, New Labour's employment policies are designed to improve workers' human capital and skill, either to stay in a job or to get a job (Bevir, 2005: 93). In other words, New Labour has adopted the Conservatives' argument that the welfare state creates a dependency culture in the underclass which must be countered by clear responsibilities on the part of the unemployed, and has supplemented this with a stronger focus on human capital and empowerment. Thus an incremental change in the conception of 'Individualisation' in employment policy occurred between the Conservative government and New Labour. The development can be depicted as in model 3, below:



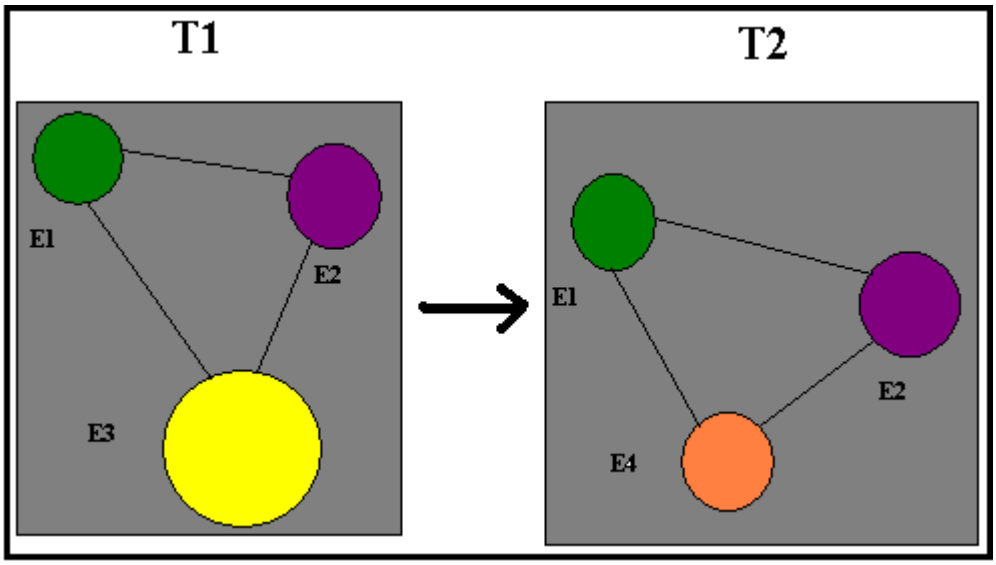
Model 3: Individualisation in British employment policy

The model shows how the idea of individualisation contains the same overall elements of meaning in both periods. This would support the argument that there has been no paradigmatic change, but it does not support an argument that the idea of individualisation has not changed between the two governments. Rather, the element of 'Human capital'-individualisation has gained ground to the 'Incentives'-individualisation, thus changing the relative weight of the two elements. New Labour has developed this nexus between human capital/empowerment and individual incentives on the basis of the Conservatives' policies,

but added to this a greater weight for the enabling responsibility on part of the state. In sum, the ideational change has been incremental which has led to both the sustaining of a certain interpretation and understanding of unemployment as well as a focus on human capital and empowerment as important solutions to unemployment.

4.2 Change in the composition of elements in an idea: New Labour and the governing of the welfare state

Another way ideas develop incrementally is through a change in the composition of the network of elements that constitute an idea. If we imagine an idea made up by the relation between three ideas, this kind of development occurs when one or two of these elements are substituted with a new element. As argued above, the meaning of an idea derives from the relation between the elements. Thus, a substitution of one of the elements with a new element leads to a change in the meaning of the idea. The change is incremental, because although the idea changes meaning, the meaning still in large part hinges on the ideas that were part of the original network. This kind of incremental change is illustrated in model 4 below:



Model 4: Change in the composition of the network of elements

Before the change, in time 1 (T1), the meaning of the idea derives from the elements E1, E2 and E3. With the change in the composition of elements in the idea, E3 is substituted with a new element, E4, while the elements E1 and E2 remain in the network. This necessarily leads to a change in the meaning of the idea, but the change is not large enough to talk of a new idea or a paradigmatic change. The change in the composition of elements may also lead to a change in the relative weight of the elements. This is also illustrated in

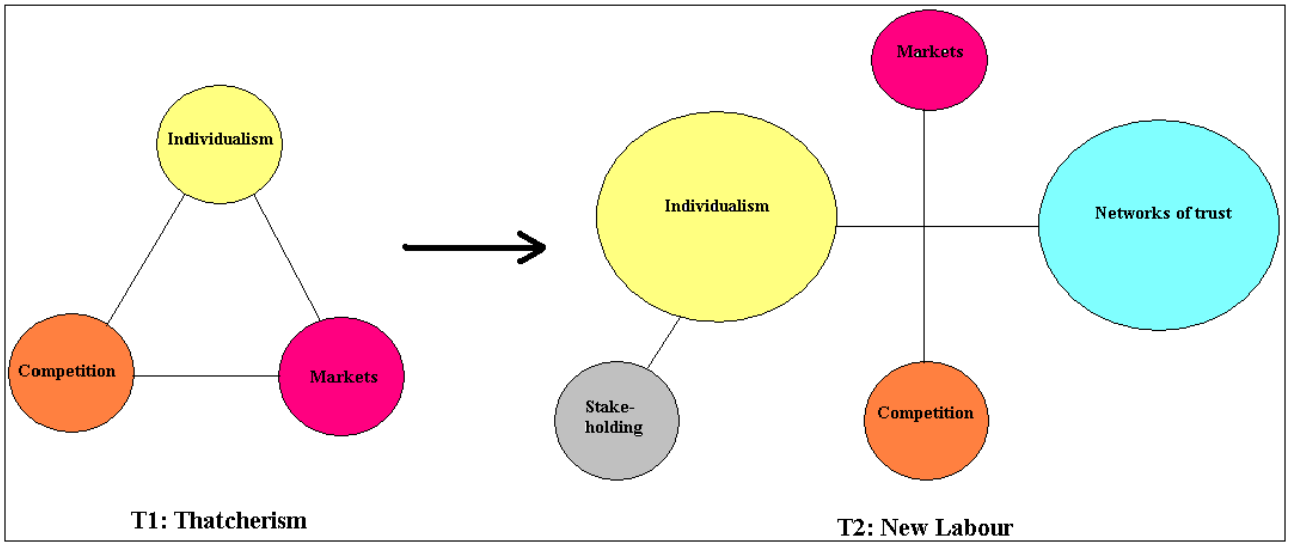
model 3, where E1 and E2 have the same size in T1 and T2, but their relative weight in relation to the third element changes from T1 to T2 because E4 is larger than E3[5].

Once again the mechanism of incremental ideational change can be illustrated by recent developments in British politics, specifically New Labour's policies on governing the welfare state. Once again the generally story is that New Labour has build their policies on the foundation of Thatcherism, but in this case we see how New Labour also adds a new element of meaning to the idea. Bevir (2005) and Bevir and Rhodes (2003) have argued that New Labour has absorbed New Right and Thatcherism's critique of the bureaucratic governance principles Old Labour used governing the welfare state. The critique was based on a condemnation of the centralised command-structure which was believed to produce unnecessary inefficiencies that eroded individual freedom. The Thatcherist solution was, in short, privatisation, marketisation and the introduction of New Public Management. This would make government agencies more efficient, and citizens would gain influence as consumers of public services.

It is widely debated how great an influence Thatcher had in implementing these measures (see e.g. Schmidt, 2002), but she was certainly successful in influencing New Labour's understanding of how the public sector should be run. Thus, New Labour agreed to the conservative critique that the government had been overly centralised and 'statist' leading to inefficiency and top-down governance. But it rejected the Conservative's atomised conception of citizens and users as self-interested consumers in a market place. Instead, New Labour argued that though the state should be responsive to the legitimate preferences of citizens, "public services should encourage co-operation while continuing to use market mechanisms when suitable" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 129). New Labour has been open to the advantages of the market – and has thus absorbed the New Right's criticism of an excessive public sector – but New Labour has at the same time voiced scepticism to what extent the market is able to solve public problems. New Labour thus suggests a mix of hierarchies, markets and networks with choices depending on the nature of the service under consideration. Though New Labour to a large degree supports the critique of Old Labour, the party has been sceptical about the dichotomy of public-private that New Public Management created, and aims instead to develop networks between public and private agencies. In this vision, the relation between state and civil society is a matter of 'stakeholding' not individualism (see Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 128). In other words, New Labour has developed a different conception of public service that focuses on how the public sector can become more efficient through joint-up government and networks of trust between the public and private sector.

[5] The two examples from British politics illustrates how the two processes of a change in the relative weight of elements of meaning and the coupling with new elements of meaning are most often complimentary processes. The two processes are discussed separately to show how they can be distinguished analytically.

This is obviously the very short story of how New Labour changed the structure of British public administration. It serves to illustrate how ideas can change incrementally, when new elements of meaning are added to the idea. The ideational development in British welfare governance between the Thatcher- and Major governments and New Labour is depicted below:



Model 5: The ideational change in welfare governance between Thatcher and New Labour governments.

Before the change, in T1, there existed three related elements of meaning: Individualism, competition and markets. They were related in the sense that the particular conception of citizens and bureaucrats, individualism, supported the use of marketisation and competition between private and public agencies and within the state. The overall aim was to limit state bureaucracy and extent the freedom of the citizen. From T1 to T2 – that is, the change from a Conservative to a New Labour government – these elements are maintained, but two new elements are joined with the network: Networks of trust and stakeholding. This has two significant consequences: First, as the model shows, markets and competition still play a role in public policy, but less than networks of trust. This marks New Labour's belief that markets – in public or private form – is not always the best solution. From their perspective public and private agencies should join forces in so called 'public-private partnerships' through networks of trust. In the new network of meaning, though markets and competition are sometimes viable solution to public problems, it is networks of trust that structure private-public interaction as well as the more general governance of welfare institutions. Second, the meaning of individualism changes with New Labour. New Labour is willing to put greater emphasis on citizen choice, but this element of meaning is combined with 'stakeholding', that is, a conception of the citizen-state nexus with a combined focus on rights and responsibility. In the Thatcher-governments there existed an antagonism be-

tween state and civil society, whereas in the New Labour vision individualism is joined by the concept of stakeholding to discursively mark a more productive and reciprocal relation between communities of citizens and the state.

Overall, the development in New Labour's idea does not lead to paradigmatic change, because the leading element remains in the cluster and keeps its organising role in the cluster. New Labour's policies have, despite their discursive difference from Thatcherism, maintained much of the Conservatives' heritage of New Public Management and citizens as consumers. However, the change is still significant, because the development removes an important part of the Conservative's policy in the 1990s, namely the antagonism between state and people. The network of meaning that New Labour employs in its policies thus serves to legitimize what is constructed as a new relation between citizen and state. From a theoretical perspective the analysis shows, first, that the meaning of an idea can change over time without a paradigmatic break with the original idea, and, second, that this change can significantly affect an idea and lead to the exclusion of previously important elements of an idea.

5. Conclusion

Historical institutional and ideational research are two traditions that share a number of similarities and they are in many ways complimentary (Béland, 2005). An unfortunate affinity between the two sets of theories, however, is their tendency of focusing on stability. At a first glance, ideational research seems able to explain the change that historical institutionalism has difficulties accounting for within its theoretical premises (Schmidt, 2008a and b), but as argued above, ideational theories are also focused on stability, stemming from the common conceptualisation of ideas as relatively coherent and stable outside periods of crisis. This is analogous to the conceptualisation of institutions as inherently stable and coherent (Lieberman, 2002; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). The aim of this paper has been to show how much can be won by employing parts of a post-structuralist perspective on discourse without accepting its questionable and analytically problematic epistemological and ontological assumptions.

There are a number of reasons why discourse theory can add to the understanding of how 'ideas matter'. First, with the incorporation of a focus on the discursively founded micro-structure of ideas, the analytical framework can capture change on both lower and higher levels of an idea. Through a rejection of the notion that ideas have a core from which it derives it meaning, the ideas are broken down into smaller pieces that in different ways are related. Thus this perspective sensitises the analyst to how ideas are made from horizontal, vertical and diachronic relations between different elements and ideas.

Second, developing a theory that focuses on the dynamic nature of ideas poses in no way a rejection of the importance of actors in ideational processes. To the contrary, as shown above, there exists no theoretical contradiction in arguing that ideas are defined by their relation to other ideas, and assigning an important role to actors. Instead of taking sides in a meaningless discussion of whether ideas control actors or actors control ideas, the paper argues that actors and ideas are interrelated. Thus actors can use ideas, but due to the contested nature of ideas, actors are not able to control the meaning of an idea.

Third, the approach is open towards multiple methodological approaches. The incremental development of ideas can be analysed mainly from a discourse-oriented perspective with an emphasis on how different ideas are expressed over shorter or longer spans of time. It is also possible to focus more on how different actors try to influence discourses within certain institutional settings. However – and this is the most important methodological point – analyses gain most from *combining* discourse analysis and actor-centred explanations. Such an approach strengthens the possibility of claiming some form of general causality while paying due attention to the micro- and macro-foundations of ideas.

Fourth, a theory of incremental ideational change strengthens the most important argument in ideational research, namely that 'ideas matter'. The analysis has sought to demonstrate from a theoretical perspective, how ideas not only matter in times of crisis, but also develop and have political effects in times of relative stability. Obviously we are still in dire need of empirical analyses of exactly how ideas change incrementally, and not least how this leads to significant political changes.

The argument that ideational research has much to gain from developing ideational theories with a micro-foundation that incorporates certain theories from post-structuralist discourse theory, should not be taken to imply that I believe the approach can answer all questions pertaining to ideational developments. In some, possible in many, cases the strong focus on the internal workings of ideas needs to be supplemented with other types of theories that to a greater extent incorporate structural and 'material' factors, for example how the political system is structured, the political power that actors (e.g. interest groups, international organisations) get from different institutional positions, the effect of existing political institutions more generally, the political opportunity-structure, elections, the workings of the media system, etc. However, it is the argument of this paper that analysts miss out on an important determinant of change if they ignore how ideas develop incrementally over time, and focus all energy on how ideas perform their stabilising functions between crises.

In the effort to open up both historical institutionalism and ideational research for incremental transformative change, it is increasingly becoming apparent that we need to look inside the black box of the two central variables, ideas and institutions – both during formative moments and critical junctures as well as in times of relative stability.

And, most importantly, to develop theories that analyse the close relation between the ‘big bangs’ and everyday ‘muddling through’ of politics.

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